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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MONROVIA 000446

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: CRIME RATE STEADY BUT PUBLIC'S UNEASINESS GROWS

Classified By: Ambassador Booth for reasons 1.4 B and D.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Liberian public has grown uneasy about a rumored increase in violent crime since the beginning of 2008. While crime continues at a high rate, UN crime statistics do not indicate a sharp increase. The public perception continues, however, because of frequent media coverage of violent crime incidents, especially armed robbery (the "arm" is usually a knife/machete rather than a gun). Distrustful of the police and the judicial system, Monrovia neighborhoods have resorted to vigilante justice on several occasions this year in attempts to apprehend alleged offenders. UNMIL and the Liberia National Police (LNP) have recently concluded "Operation Thunderstorm," a series of raids that led to the arrest of 16 of Liberia's most wanted criminals. Although the operation was successful, it underscored the weakness of LNP command and control. While the public's attention is on armed robbery, rape is the most prevalent crime. The public widely supports a bill the House passed May 6 that would make armed robbery that results in a death a capital offense (by public hanging), but mistakenly believes that it would apply to all armed robberies. END SUMMARY.

PUBLIC PERCEIVES INCREASE IN CRIME

¶2. (C) The level of violent crime in Liberia, and particularly in Monrovia, has been consistently high since the end of conflict in 2003. But, according to UNMIL security statistics, violent crime has not increased significantly over the last year and therefore the public perception of a recent "crime wave" appears to be unfounded. The Deputy Commissioner of LNP's Crime Service Department, Sam Saryon told PolOff May 29 that crime had actually decreased over the past year but that a wide media campaign to encourage better citizen reporting of incidents had kept the statistics high. He said LNP radio, print, and sign campaigns aimed at increasing reporting were part of a wider LNP effort to regain the trust of the citizenry and build better officer-community cooperation.

¶3. (C) UNMIL statistics on crime seem to bear this out, as incidents of armed robberies have risen only slightly from the previous year. However, UNPOL officers have noted that the gangs seem to be better organized and more aggressive than in the past.

CITIZENS STILL DISTRUSTFUL OF POLICE AND JUDICIAL SYSTEM

¶4. (C) The publicity has done very little to improve the LNP's public image. Continued police corruption at the street level gives the public an "us versus them" mentality with respect to the LNP. A few recent press editorials alleged that high ranking police officials have cooperated with and protected criminals so that they could both reap the gains of crime. The public is also frustrated to see criminals released on bail and never tried because of Liberia's weak judicial system. A recent indictment of three LNP officers for torturing a detained prisoner may also lead to increased skepticism. (Note: The indictment is the result

of increased capacity of the LNP Professional Standards Division, under the mentoring of U.S. advisors. End note.)

SKEPTICAL CITIZENS TURN TO VIGILANTE JUSTICE

15. (SBU) Because of the lack of confidence in Liberia's legal and judicial institutions, there have been several instances of vigilante justice in various Monrovia neighborhoods since the beginning of the year. On April 1, the body of a suspected criminal was found on a city beach. On April 18, a mob captured and killed two suspected robbers in the Vai Town borough. The following day, an angry mob stormed the New Kru Town Magisterial Court and demanded that two armed robbery suspects be turned over to them for mob justice. The mob set the building on fire after LNP officers guarding the court refused to let them enter. UNMIL intervened and used live bullets to disperse the crowd. Five people were injured from gun shot wounds. Police had to protect two other robbers who were hiding from a mob inside the Liberian Petroleum Refinery Corporation. Vigilante groups have formed in some neighborhoods to guard and patrol areas at night.

LNP's "OPERATION THUNDERSTORM" SUCCESSFULLY NABBED CRIME KINGPINS

16. (C) In an attempt to gain the public's confidence and lessen the instances of vigilante justice, the LNP cooperated with UNMIL in late April to fight violent crime through an initiative called "Operation Thunderstorm." Saryon told PolOff that the offensive included significant intelligence operations and wide-spread use of community informants inside the neighborhood watch (vigilante) patrols. In all, the

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operation was quite successful in that 16 of the LNP's most wanted criminals were arrested. Saryon said that all were wanted for armed robbery and drug offenses. Most had been previously arrested but then got bailed out and then "bribed their cases closed." He expressed pride that this was the first time that so many "kingpins" had been incarcerated at the same time and noted that reports of violent crime have decreased significantly since their capture. He also pointed out that the new-arrestees come from all four of Monrovia's major gangs and therefore feels confident that Liberia's criminal agents are "handicapped" for the moment.

17. (C) UNMIL agrees that Operation Thunderstorm has temporarily slowed crime, and will do an after action review to determine what factors led to its success. However, our UNMIL contacts are less positive about the LNP role. The LNP was largely absent in the first phase, and at times Operation Thunderstorm was a unilateral UNMIL endeavor. The MOJ advisor assigned to the task of coordinating the Liberian response was suspended for not following through in providing LNP officers proper support. He has since returned to work, but President Sirleaf has removed him from any operational role. UN Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) Ellen Loj was extremely critical of the LNP in a recent International Contact Group on Liberia meeting, saying that the lack of performance "showed a lot of weakness in the command structure, including between the LNP and the Minister of Justice." She said that a UN Judicial Sector Assessment Team has concluded that "the police and justice systems are not functioning." The SRSG said that UNMIL will develop a three-year plan to strengthen LNP command and control as part of its drawdown.

USG-FUNDED TRAINING HELPING LNP CONDUCT BETTER INVESTIGATIONS

18. (C) Saryon expressed frustration that too many arrested criminals were let out almost immediately by judges "who are too lenient with bail or who accept bribes." He was particularly upset that armed robbery was a bailable offense and hopes that the Legislature will move to change that soon (see paragraph 9). Saryon said he instructed his investigative officers in cases of violent crime to "find the

tiniest shred of evidence" that could possibly point to rape (a non-bailable offense) so that suspected criminals would not get out of jail so quickly. He also complained that the average LNP line police officer was not capable of putting together enough evidence to present a case to the court within the statutory limit of 72 hours. He lauded the USG-funded JSSL program and the U.S. CivPol officers for the training they have given some of his staff in how to meet that 72-hour deadline and said the LNP Criminal Investigations Division was already doing a better job in that regard.

BILL UNDER CONSIDERATION TO TOUGHEN PENALTIES FOR ARMED ROBBERY

19. (U) In late April, the Liberian House of Representatives unanimously passed a bill making armed robbery, hijacking and kidnapping non-bailable offenses. The bill, which is now under consideration in the Senate, would make the sentences for these crimes between 15 and 20 years. If the incident resulted in serious bodily harm, the sentence would be life imprisonment. If a death actually occurred during the crime, the penalty would be execution by hanging. The public has praised this bill through radio talk shows and editorials but appears to mistakenly think that all armed robberies would carry a possible death sentence.

10. (SBU) Despite the public focus on armed robbery, criminal justice experts agree that the single most prevalent crime facing Liberians is rape. The UN police commissioner said in a meeting recently that reports of rapes is increasing dramatically, but that this is more of a reflection of peoples' willingness to report the crime, and that the numbers are "only the tip of the iceberg." U.S. advisors to the Ministry of Justice concur and are focusing their efforts on gender based violence. All are concerned however, that the judicial sector's inability to process cases means that many of the accused languishing in prison may in fact not be guilty of rape.

COMMENT

11. (C) The public perception of a 2008 crime wave is not supported by either LNP or UNMIL statistics. Yet, as long as the police and the judicial system are perceived as being part of the problem, either by outright collusion with criminals or by their inability to protect citizens, communities will continue to take justice into their own hands. Operation Thunderstorm only slightly improved the public's perception of the police. The LNP needs to continue

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its community outreach and help the citizens form effective (not vigilante) neighborhood watch systems. The public will be less likely to resort to mob violence if the judicial system functions well enough to fully prosecute the accused and sentence defendants found guilty. Until then, the GOL needs to worry that the increase in vigilantism could lead to greater insecurity for Monrovia and the rest of Liberia. We agree that the fundamental issue is the lack of command and control within the LNP, and this must be addressed before UNMIL withdraws. While police ineffectiveness is a major problem, the entire judicial sector needs overall in order to create meaningful rule of law.

BOOTH